Explaining First Language Acquisition.

From infancy through the early school years. 3 main theoretrical positions explain language development: The Behaviourist Perspective.

Behaviourism is a theory of learning who the best-known proponent was Skinner. Traditional behaviourists hypothesized that when children imitated the language produced by those around them, their attempts to reproduce what they heard received "positive reinforcement". Thus enconuraged by their enviroment, children would continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they formed "habits" of correct language use. The quality and quantity of the language the child hears, as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the enviroment, would shape the child´s language behaviour.

The behaviourists viewed **imitation** (word-for-word repetition of all or parts of someone else´s utterance) and **practice** (repetitive manipulation of form) as the primary processes in language development.

Order of events.

Imitantion and practice alone cannot explain some of the forms created by children. They appear to pick out patterns and generalize them to create new contexts.

Behaviourism seem to offer a reasonable way of understanding how children learn some of the regular and routine aspects of language. Although Behaviourism goes some way to explain the sorts of overgeneralization that children make, classical behaviourism isn´t a satisfactory explanation for the acquisition of the more complex grammar that children acquire.

The innatist perspective.

Chomsky is one of the most influential figures in linguistics. His ideas about how language is acquired and how it is stored in the mind sparked a revolution in many aspects of linguistics and psychology, including the stuy of language acquisition. The **innatist** perspective is related to Chomsky´s hypothesis that all human languages are based on some innate universal principles.

Chomsky challenged the Behaviourist explanation for language acquisition arguin that children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the same way that others biological functions develop. The child doesn't have to be taught. The enviroment makes only a basic contribution, the availability of people who speak to the child. The child´s biological endowment will do the rest.

He also argued that the behaviourist theory failed to account for "the logical problem of language acquisition". He concluded that children´s mind aren´t blank slates to be filled by imitating language they hear. Instead, he hypothesized, children are born with a specific innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system on the basis of the samples of a natural language they are exposed to. This innate endowment was seen as a sort of template, containing the principles that are universal to all human languages. This **universal grammar** would prevent the child from pursuing all sorts of wrong hypotheses about how language systems might work. If children are pre-equipped with UG, then what they have to learn is the way in which the language they are acquiring make use of these principles.

Researchers who study language acquisition from the innatist perspective argue that such complex grammar could never be learned purely on the basis of imitating and practising sentences available in the **input**. They hypothesize that since all children acquire the language of their enviroment, they must have some innate machanism or knowledge that allows them to discover such complex syntax in spite of limitations of the input. Further more, they hypothesize that the innate mechanism is used exclusively for language acquisition.

The innatist perspective emphasizes the fact that almost all children successfully acquire their native language.

The innatist perspective is often linked to the Critical Period Hypothesis. Beyond "critical periods", it is either difficult or impossible to acquire those abilities.

The CPH suggests that children who are not given access to language in infancy and early childhood will never acquire language is these deprivations go on for too long.
The innatist perspective is thus partly based on evidence that there is a critical period for language acquisition. It is also seen as an explanation for "the logical problem of language acquisition" that is the question of how adult speakers come to know the complex structure of their first language on the basis of the limited samples of language to which they are exposed.

INTERACTIONIST, DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVES.

Developmental and cognitive psychologist have focused on the interplay between the innate learning ability of children and the enviroment in which they develop. They argue that the innatist place too much emphasis on the "final state" (the competence of adult native speaker) and not enough on the developmental aspects of language acquisition. Language acquisition is but one example of the human child´s ability to learn from experience, and they see no need to assume that there are specific brain structure devoted to language acquisition.

They hypothesize that what children need to know is essential available in the language they are exposed to as they hear it used in thousand of hours of interactions with the people and objects around them. Psychologist attribute more importance to the enviroment than the innatist do even though they also recognize a powerful learning mechanism in the human brain. They see language acquisition as similar to and influenced by the acquisition of other kinds of skill and knowledge, rather than as something diferent from and largely independent of the child´s experience and cognitive development.

Piaget and Vygotsky.

Jean **Piaget** was one of the earliest proponents of the view that children´s language is built on their cognitive development. He observed infants and children in their play and in their interaction with objects and people. He was able to trace the development of their cognitive understanding of such things as <u>object permanence</u> (knowing that things hiddenfrom sight are still there), the <u>stablity of quantities regardless of changes in their</u> (figuring out which properties of a set of rods cause some rods to sink and others to float on water).
The developing cognitive understanding is built on the interaction between the child and the things that can be observed or manupulated. For Piaget, language was one of a number of symbols systems that are developed in childhood. Language can be used to represent knowledge that children have acquired through physical interaction with the enviroment.
Another influential student, Lev **Vygotsky**, observed interactions among children and also btw children and adults in schools. He concluded that language develops primarily from social interaction. He argued that in a supporative interactive enviroment, children are able advance to higher levels of knowledge and performance. Vygotsky reffered to a metaphorical place in which children could do more than they would be capable of doing independently as the **zone of proximal development**).

He observed the importance of conversations that children have with adults and with other children and saw in these conversations the origins of both language and thought. Conversations provide the child with **scafolding that is** a kind of supportive structure that helps them make the most of the knowledge they have and also to acquire new knowledge.

His view differs from Piaget´s. Piaget saw language as a symbol system that culd be used to express knowledge acquired through interaction with the physical world. For Vygotsky, thought was essentially internalized speech, and speech emerged in social interaction. He have become increasingly central in research on second language development.

Cross-Cultural Research.

Researchers have studied children´s language learning enviroment in different cultural communities. The research has focused on the development of language itself and the ways in which the enviroment provides what children need for language acquisition.

One feature of cross-culture research is the description of child-rearing patterns. People studied the apparent effects on language acquisition of the ways in which adults talk to and interact with young children.

This **child-directed speech** may be characterized by a slower rate of delivery, higher pitch, more varied intonation, shorter, simpler sentence patterns, stress on key words, frequent repetition and paraphrase. Adults often repeat the content of a child´s utterance, but they **recast** (expand) it into a grammatically correct sentence.

The importance of interaction.

The role of interaction btw a language-learning child and an **interlocutor** is illuminated by cases where such integration is missing.

One-to-one interaction gives children acces to language that is adjusted to their level of comprehension. When a child doesn´t understand, the adult may repeat or paraphrase.

Usage-Based Learning.

Research has documented the ways in which children interact with the enviroment, developmental and cognitive psychologists find further evidence that language acquisition is "usage-based". Language acquisition is possible because of children´s general cognitive capacities and the vast number of opportunities they have to make connections btw the language they hear and what they experience in their enviroment.

The usage-based perspective on language acquisition differs from the Behaviourist view in that the emphasis is more on the child´s ability to create networks of associations rather than on processes of imitation and habit formation. This view also differs from the innatists because language acquisition isn´t seen as requiring a separate "module of the mind" but rather depends on the child´s general learning abilities and the contributions of the enviroment.

In a usage-based model, language acquisition involves associating words with elements of external reality and a process of associating words and phrases with the other words and phrases that occur with them, or words with grammatical morphemes that occur with them.

Of particular importance to this hypothesis is the fact that children are exposed to many thousand of opportunities to learn words and phrases. Learning takes place gradually.

Childhood bilinguialism.

Some children learn multiple languages from earliest childhood, others when they go to school. The acquisition and maintenance of more than one language can open doors to many opportunities.

Children who learn more than one language from earliest childhood are referred to as "simultaneous bilinguals", whereas those who learn another language later may be called "sequential bilinguals".

The Nature of Universal Grammar.

The idea of Unversal Grammar (UG) by Noam Chomsky has been a crucial force in linguistics. Linguistics have defined themselves by their reactions to it, in terms of general concepts of language and language acquisition and also in how they carry out linguistic description.

The early development of UG Theory.
Development has taken place at two levels. On one level are the general concepts about language and language acquisition on which the theory is based. The origins of such ideas as competence and performance can be traced back to the late 50s-60s. On this level the UG Theory is recognizable in any of its incarnations and the broad outlines have remianed substantially the same despite numerous additions.
On another level come ideas about the description of syntax, which fall into definite historical phases.

Sentences could be grammatical but meaning and hence that syntax is independent of semantics.

The Standard Theory was distinguished by the introduction of the competence/performance distinction between language knowledge and language use and by its recognition of “deep” and “surface” structure in the sentence.

Government/Blinding (GB) **Model** claimed that human languages consisted of principles that were the same for any grammar parameters that allowed grammars to vary in limited ways, t be illustrated in the next chapter. It also refined deep and surface structure into the more technical notions of “D-structure” and “S-structure”.

The focus of all Chomsky´s theories has been what we know about language and where this knowledge comes from. The major concern is always the human mind.
Language is seen as something in the indivitual mind of every human being. Language also consist of physical events and objects, language relates to things outside our minds.
The sounds and written symbols are the external face of language, its contact with the world through physical forms. The meaning are the internal face of language, its contact with the rest of cognition; they are abstract mental representations, independent of physical forms. The task of linguistics is to establish the nature of this relationship between external sounds and internal meaning.

The difficulty of handing language is due to the complex and often baffing links between them.

According to Chomsky, the human mind bridges this gap via a **computational system** that relates meaning to sequences of sounds in one direction and sequences of sounds to meaning in the other.

The sheer sounds of language are linked to the meaning in their minds by the computational system. What speakers of a language know isn´t just the sounds or the meaning but how to connect the two.

Chomsly has been interested in exploring the connections between the central computational system and, on the one side, the physical expressions of language, on the other, the mental representation f concepts. At the point of contact with sounds, the mind needs to change the internal forms of language used by the computational system into actual physical sounds or letters through complex commands to muscles called **sensorimotor system**.

At the point of contact with meaning, the mind needs to change the representation of language used by the computational system into the general concepts used by the mind called the **conceptual-intentional system**.

The point of contact are the interfaces between the computational system, between language knowledge and two other things which are not language- the outside world of sounds and the inside world of concepts. For computational system to work, it must be able to interface in both directions, to have two “access systems”.